

The Effects of Introspective Journal Writing on Learner Proficiency in Second Language Learning

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Abstract

This study investigates the effect learner attention has on proficiency in second language learning. Does increased learner focus enhance learning? Introspective journal writing is explored as a means by which learners give attention to their learning. Learner proficiency is measured by unit exam scores over two semesters.

Over a two-semester period, 24 students enrolled in two sections of elementary French at Henderson State University were observed. During the fall semester, one section acted as the experimental group (13 students), receiving the treatment of journal writing, while the other section acted as the control group (11 students), receiving no treatment. Throughout the semester, both groups were tested by unit exams. The unit exam means were plotted and observed for evidence. These means were then tested statistically (Case II t-test) and analyzed for significance. During the spring semester, each class switched roles as control and experimental groups. Unit exam scores were then administered, and the exam means were plotted and observed for evidence. The results indicated no significant difference between the exam scores of those who wrote journals and those who did not. This paper discusses these results and their pedagogical implications for instructors wishing to offer more effective methods of language instruction.

Introduction

The concept of journal writing is not new to the field of education. Evidences of its implementation are found at every level of instruction (kindergarten through university level (Sensenbaugh 1993)) and involve a variety of content areas ranging from writing, literature, social studies, mathematics, biology, and teacher training (Porter et al. 1990; Young 1990; Erhart 1991; Richards 1991; Egbert 1992; Gipe 1992; Hancock 1993). Journal writing contributes significantly to learner training in that it gives learners a medium in which to focus on their learning,

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synthesize and integrate their learning, as well as, assess and repair their learning processes (Walden 1988; Hedlund et al. 1989; Burnham 1992).

Journal writing gives the student a place to think out loud, free from the constraints of time, grammaticality, and teacher expectation. Newton posits that such a freedom allows students to “immerse themselves in their own learning process” (Newton 1991, 477). Burnham (1992) notes that as students write journals, they are able to step back and objectively observe their learning processes and interpret their feelings about them. Walden (1988) believes that as the learners observe these processes, their metacognitive awareness is heightened, thus allowing them to see their options and the choices they may make with respect to their learning. Hedlund et al. (1989) further comment as to the “interactive–metacognitive activity” that takes place as one reflects upon one’s own thoughts. As this interactive–metacognitive activity increases, the learners are drawn into their learning.

Active involvement profoundly affects memory and learning. If individuals become conscious of their personal histories and past experiences, they can better integrate and assimilate new information.

(Hedlund et al. 1989, 106)

As students involve themselves in their learning through journal writing they begin to identify new bits of information and make connections not only between the old information and the new, but between themselves and the information (Porter et al. 1990; Burnham 1992). Information is reviewed, evaluated, and assimilated into existing knowledge. Journal writing may be implemented as a method of assessment and/or self–assessment (Walden 1988). The instructor’s communication with the student through the journal creates an open dialogue between the learner and instructor, thus allowing for further repair, guidance, and support throughout the learning process (Porter et al. 1990). In this manner, assessment allows students to assume greater responsibility in their learning and develop skills that will allow them to continue learning throughout their lives (Walden 1988; Porter et al. 1990). Guiding the students to the level of autonomous learning empowers them to make informed choices, thus dissolving the limitations to their learning and knowledge.

[The] journal works on the principle that awareness precede evaluation and that evaluation encourages change. Writing journals enables students to gain some distance and objectivity toward their experience, to articulate their values and beliefs and to gain control of their lives and begin making informed choices.

(Burnham 1992, 509)

What implications might journal writing have on the field of second language learning? Those who undertake the formal study of a second language often times experience feelings of

anticipation, anxiety, and fear in varying degrees depending on their previous language learning experiences. Journal writing may be one mode of processing such anxieties and fears while at the same time clearing the mind to give attention to the learning process. During this process, the learners invest their time and energy, allowing them a sense of ownership and responsibility in their own learning. The following questions are raised: "Does such an investment contribute to learner proficiency in second language learning?" "Does the increased focus on learning by the learners affect their proficiency in second language learning?" Further study into the effects of journal writing on second language learning lies worthy of consideration when choosing the most effective means of language instruction.

Statement of Purpose

This study seeks to investigate the effect that introspective journal writing has on learner proficiency in second language learning, as measured by unit exam scores.

In this study, *introspective journal writing* was defined as a weekly journal entry in which the students reflected upon and gave reactions to their learning. The instructor returned the journals each week, responding to their reflections, answering their questions, clarifying ambiguities, and encouraging them in their learning, thus creating an open dialogue between the teacher and the student (Porter et al. 1990). Students were not dictated as to the length of each journal entry, however, they were simply asked to review their learning. The instructor made suggestions as to what could be included in their journals (comments or questions on homework, classroom activities, classroom procedures, exams) (see Appendix B). The students were also encouraged to express any thoughts, feelings, and ideas they had about learning French. The fact that students were told about the focus of the study and were aware of their participation in it must be acknowledged. This awareness alone further increased their focus on learning, as opposed to their not being informed and then writing journals.

In this study, *learner proficiency* was defined as any increase in knowledge that the students had with respect to various language levels (grammar, lexicon, phonology, syntax) and skills (speaking, listening, reading, writing) involved in the elementary French curriculum at Henderson State University. This proficiency was measured by the exams given after the completion of each unit. The exams were developed, administered, and corrected by the instructor. The exams were grammar-based and discrete-point in nature. Each exam typically included a listening section, several grammar sections, and a culture section (see Appendix C for sample test).

Given those definitions, the variables of the study were determined as follows:

Dependent variable: learner proficiency as measured by unit exam scores

(124)

Independent variable: introspective journal writing

Two hypotheses are proposed:

H_0 : In second language learning, introspective journal writing has no effect on learner proficiency, as measured by unit exam scores

Scientifically stated:

$$H_0: \bar{X}_1 = \bar{X}_2$$

where \bar{X}_1 = mean of students' unit exam scores while writing journals

\bar{X}_2 = mean of students' unit exam scores while not writing journals

H_1 : In second language learning, introspective journal writing has no effect on learner proficiency, as measured by unit exam scores

Scientifically stated:

$$H_0: \bar{X}_1 \neq \bar{X}_2$$

where \bar{X}_1 mean of students' unit exam scores while writing journals

\bar{X}_2 mean of students' unit exam scores while not writing journals

Although there is evidence that journal writing has a positive effect on learning in certain content areas such as math, biology, social studies and literature, there is limited evidence as to its effect on second language learning. Therefore, a non-directional hypothesis was formulated due to the lack of previous empirical evidence for directionality. The alpha level was set at .05.

Methods

Subjects

The subjects selected were the elementary-level students of French at Henderson State University during the academic year 1993-1994. At Henderson State University two sections of elementary French are offered, therefore, each section acted as an intact group, one as an experimental group, and the other as a control group.

Because the students were not randomly selected, an attempt was made to control for pre-existing differences. Only students with limited exposure to French (two years or fewer of formal study) and previous language learning experience (two years or fewer of formal study) were selected for the study. [To standardize the measure of years of study, one year of college-level instruction was established as equivalent to two years of secondary school-level (high school) language instruction. The rationale behind this standardization was based on the assumption that the breadth, depth, and pace of college level instruction are much greater than that of secondary school-level instruction]. These students were chosen by way of a questionnaire (see Appendix A). From the students surveyed, 13 (fall/experimental

group) and 11 (fall/control group) were selected for each intact group.

Since the same instructor taught both sections, there was no need to control for pre-existing differences with respect to teacher experience and training. Every attempt was made to conduct each section of the elementary French course identically.

Materials

The materials needed to conduct this study included an introductory explanation of the study (with a release form—see Appendix B), unit exams (see Appendix C), weekly journal entries, and questionnaires for students (used to determine pre-existing differences).

Procedures

A simplified explanation of the purpose and procedure of the study was presented to each class at the beginning of each semester. At this time, permission was solicited from each student to employ data as observed evidence. As a matter of consistency, journals remained a part of the course requirements, regardless of whether the permission to use the data was granted by the student or not.

The section meeting at 8:00 a.m. acted as the experimental group during the Fall 1993 semester, receiving the treatment of writing journals throughout the semester, and the section meeting at 11:00 a.m. acted as the control group. During the Spring 1994 semester, the 11:00 section acted as the experimental group receiving the treatment of journal writing, and the 8:00 section, therefore, acted as the control group, writing no journals. (Had a student switched sections the second semester, he or she participated in a manner opposite of that of the first semester. If the student wrote a journal during the fall, the student did not write a journal in the spring, regardless of which section he or she was in. Therefore, during the spring semester, there were students in the same class writing journals and others not). Four unit exams were administered during the fall semester and three were administered in the spring, as was determined by the elementary French syllabus and curriculum. At the conclusion of each semester, a survey was distributed to determine what previous language experience each student had had.

Design of the Study

Quasi-Experimental

G_1 Experimental Group (intact):

13 students with limited exposure to French and limited previous language training (“limited” is operationalized as two years or fewer).

G_2 Control Group (intact):

11 students with limited exposure to French and limited previous language training (“limited” is operationalized as two years or fewer).

(126)

X = treatment–journal writing throughout the semester

O = no treatment–no journal writing throughout the semester

$T_1, T_2, T_3, T_4, T_5, T_6, T_7$: Administration of unit exams, four in the fall, three in the spring

Fall 1993	Spring 1994
$\frac{G_1X - T_1 - T_2 - T_3 - T_4}{G_2O - T_1 - T_2 - T_3 - T_4}$	$\frac{G_1O - T_5 - T_6 - T_7}{G_2X - T_5 - T_6 - T_7}$

In the fall, G_1 acted as the experimental group, receiving treatment (writing journals), and G_2 acted as the control group (not writing journals). Each group was tested four times by unit exams. The means of these exam scores were plotted and observed for evidence to accept or reject H_0 . These mean scores were then tested statistically (Case II t-test) for significance.

In the spring, each group switched roles, G_1 now acting as the control group and G_2 acting as the experimental group. The rationale behind this switch was to counterbalance the progress or lack of progress that students made which might have been attributed to the progressive difficulty of the course, rather than the students' lack of focus on learning. The strongest comparison data might have been made in the fall because both groups began untreated. In the spring semester, G_1 was being compared to G_2 , with G_2 writing journals this time. However, G_1 had already received treatment in the fall, thus possibly affecting the results.

Analysis

After the mean scores of each class were plotted with respect to treatment or lack of treatment, the tendencies were observed. The statistical results of the study are summarized in the following table.

As shown by the data in Table 1, there was evidence to reject the H_1 and accept the H_0 . The mean scores were then tested statistically to ensure that these tendencies were, in fact, not significant. In order to review the data collected from the procedure, a Case II t-test was selected as the statistical measure because of its ability to compare means of two sample groups. Before applying the t-test, the researcher checked to ensure that all the assumptions were met for such an analysis.

The underlying assumptions for a t-test are that (1) the scores in each group are normally distributed, and (2) the variances of the scores of the two groups are equal. To check the normal distribution of each group's scores, the data may be plotted to see what type of distribution results. Another manner of checking this assumption is to consider the mean and stan-

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics (all figures are rounded to the hundredth place)

Fall 1993			
Preliminary Unit	Mean	Median	SD
G_1 (journal-writing)	94.55	94.66	4.54
G_2 (non-journal-writing)	94.05	95.25	4.39
Unit I	Mean	Median	SD
G_1 (journal-writing)	83.11	83.5	14.58
G_2 (non-journal-writing)	84.82	88.5	14.32
Unit II	Mean	Median	SD
G_1 (journal-writing)	83.77	90	14.66
G_2 (non-journal-writing)	85.7	89.25	9.14
Unit III	Mean	Median	SD
G_1 (journal-writing)	77.2	89	28.99
G_2 (non-journal-writing)	78.51	75	20.09
Spring 1994			
Unit IV	Mean	Median	SD
G_1 (non-journal-writing)	78.27	81	14.56
G_2 (non-journal-writing)	73	76	19.54
Unit V	Mean	Median	SD
G_1 (non-journal-writing)	82	85	8.8
G_2 (non-journal-writing)	82.62	82	13.51
Unit VI	Mean	Median	SD
G_1 (non-journal-writing)	75.91	78	13.21
G_2 (non-journal-writing)	79.91	81	12.56

dard deviation of each group's data and check for skewedness. To check for equal variances, the value of the standard deviation of each group's distribution of data is stated and then squared. If the squaring of each standard deviation results in equivalent in size, there is no need to check for variances.

The formula for a Case II t-test for independent samples is as follows:

$$t_{obs} = \frac{\bar{X}_1 - \bar{X}_2}{S_{\bar{X}_1 - \bar{X}_2}}$$

where \bar{X}_1 is the mean of the experimental group (journal writing) and \bar{X}_2 is the mean of the control group (non-journal writing).

$S_{(\bar{X}_1 - \bar{X}_2)}$ is the standard error of differences and is computed as follows:

$$S_{(\bar{X}_1 - \bar{X}_2)} = \sqrt{\frac{S_1^2}{n_1} + \frac{S_2^2}{n_2}}$$

S_1 = standard deviation of G_1 distribution data

S_2 = standard deviation of G_2 distribution data

(128)

$$n_1 = 13$$

$$n_2 = 11$$

$$df = (n_1 - 1) + (n_2 - 1)$$

$$= 12 + 10$$

$$= 22$$

The mean scores of each group's unit exams were compared and statistically tested for significance. The results of these tests are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Inferential Statistics

$$df = 22$$

$$\alpha = .05$$

$t_{crit} = 2.07$ for two-tailed hypothesis for non-directionality

G_1 (journal writing), G_2 (non-journal-writing)

Fall 1993	t_{obs}
Preliminary Unit	0.43
Unit I	0.89
Unit II	0.76
Unit III	0.98

G_1 (non-journal writing), G_2 (journal-writing)

Spring 1994	t_{obs}
Unit IV	0.36
Unit V	0.46
Unit VI	0.74

Since t_{obs} does not exceed t_{crit} at any point, there is no significant difference in the mean scores of both groups. The data fail to support the idea that introspective journal writing increases learner proficiency. Although there appears to be no relationship between introspective journal writing and learner proficiency, the data may be interpreted in light of the threats to the validity of the study.

Possible Threats to Validity and Discussion

There are several threats to the internal and external validity of this study. Subject selection was one major threat to validity in that each group was an intact group, formed as a result of self-selection (signing up for the class). Such selection was a threat to the generalizability of the study and therefore posed as a threat to the external validity of this study. Although it was not possible to obtain a random selection within the context of these two sections, an attempt was made to control for pre-existing differences. A student survey was distributed to gather information about each student's previous language learning experience in order to

equalize the groups and control for such differences.

The evidence that supports the idea that there is no relationship between introspective journal writing and learner proficiency may be attributed to the fact that the first semester of elementary French is very basic. It often reviews most of the concepts presented in first and second year of high school French. In each of the groups, 75% of the students ($G_1 = 10/13$ students, $G_2 = 7/11$ students) had had at least one year of high school French (equivalent to 1/2 year or one semester of college French). Both groups may have performed equally well on exams during the fall semester, irrespective of the journal writing, because of their pre-existing knowledge of French. The experimental group might not have been focusing on their learning (through journal writing) any more than the control group because the concepts were already familiar to them. An interesting modification of the design of the study might be to have both groups not write journals in the fall, and have one group write journals in the spring and then compare the means. This design might further control for the pre-existing knowledge of French.

Where the facility of the first semester posed a potential threat to the study, the opposite lies true, as well. The lack of gain in proficiency of students during the second semester might have been influenced by the difficulty of the course, rather than a lack of learner focus. As one reviews Table 1, it is evident that there is a steady decrease in the mean scores of both classes as the year progresses. The mean scores appear to vary inversely with the progression of difficulty of the course content.

Another reason for the similar performances of each group on unit exams might be that as the learners gave more attention to their learning, the teacher did as well. Because the journal was a type of open dialogue between the teacher and the students, many questions were answered and ambiguities clarified throughout the course of the year. The journal/dialogue allowed the teacher to raise her awareness of the students' needs and consequently, modify her teaching accordingly. This modification most probably occurred in both classes, as the teacher was attempting to control for unequal instruction by conducting each class identically. As difficulties in the students' learning arose, the teacher modified her teaching in *both* classes, possibly resulting in similar performance on unit exams.

Learner motivation could quite possibly have affected the results of this study. Students who are not highly motivated often fail to come to class, prepare outside of class, much less focus on their learning. Perhaps with more learner training and class building, students may develop their sense of belonging in the class, their sense of ownership in their learning, and their sense of responsibility in their learning. Perhaps in establishing these, introspective journal writing might show a stronger relationship to learner proficiency.

No attempt was made to check the validity or the reliability of the unit exams, therefore, posing a threat to the validity of the study as a whole. One must give careful consideration to these when interpreting the data or replicating the study.

The Hawthorne Effect was an additional threat to the internal validity. Students were informed about the study at the beginning of each semester and might have conducted themselves according to the study, rather than their normal manner of conduct. By the same token, students who wrote journals during the fall semester might have continued into the second semester with an increased focus on their learning. This focus might have been greater than if they had not been introduced to journal writing at all.

Effects of maturation posed possible threats to the internal validity of this study. As the semester continued, students might have become bored or unable to continue writing in the journal (Anderson 1992–1993). Some may have written in their journal with the wrong purpose, not writing about their learning, but rather writing as if it were a diary. The lack of control over such variable poses an additional threat to the study.

Conclusion

Although the results of this study support the idea that there is no relationship between introspective journal writing and learner proficiency in elementary French, there exist some very strong pedagogical implications with respect to the evidence found here. The introspective journal was meant to give students a medium for focusing in on their learning. However, the students may very well have been given opportunity without knowledge. Perhaps the students' effort to focus on their learning was there, but they lacked the practical understanding of *how* to focus on their learning. Learner training, class building, and language awareness raising are a few aspects worthy of consideration when replicating this study. To give students responsibility of their learning without practical training will very likely result in a lack of improved performance. The results of this study have proved inconclusive, however, the effects of this study are certainly not without value. The question of what effect increased learner attention has on the learner's language learning processes introduces a greater awareness in the classroom as a whole. Such raised awareness benefits both teacher and learner alike and, therefore, makes positive contributions to the field of language learning.

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Appendix A

Language Learning Experience Survey

Fall 1993

Henderson State University

Name: _____

Please circle the most appropriate answer. Do NOT consider this semester in your answers.

- | | | |
|--|---|---|
| 1. I have had no previous language learning experience. | T | F |
| 2. I have studied languages at the high school level only. | T | F |

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If true, how many years/semesters, what languages, and how long ago did you study?

3. I have studied languages at the college level only. T F

If true, how many years/semesters, what languages, and how long ago did you study?

4. I have studied languages at both the high school and college level. T F

If true, how many years/semesters, what languages, and how long ago did you study?

High School

College

5. I have traveled to these foreign countries:

6. I have hosted _____ number of foreign exchange students in my home.

For how long and from what countries were they?

How often did they speak their native language in your home?

THANK YOU FOR TAKING THE TIME TO FILL OUT THIS SURVEY!

HAPPY HOLIDAYS!

Appendix B

Journal Writing Study Explanation and Release Form

Elementary French–Spring 1994

FRE 1024

JOURNALS

Part of your homework requirement will be to maintain an introspective journal (written in English) on your thoughts, impressions, and ideas, and feelings about French and language learning. Journals should be kept in a spiral notebook or on loose-leaf paper. Journals will be collected every Friday and will count as a 20-point homework assignment. I will not give you a prescriptive number of pages you should be writing, but I am interested in seeing how much attention you are paying to your learning. Your journals will be kept completely confidential, so feel free to be completely candid in your journal.

In your journal you may:

- *compare what you're learning now to any previous language learning (method, activities,

materials, rate)

- *comment on the class activities you like and do not like
- *discuss any encounters you have with French in the community, as you go about your daily activities
- *write down any feelings of frustration, confusion, anger, happiness, delight, success you are experiencing in your language learning
- *ask questions, make suggestions or comments pertaining to class activities and your language learning

Basically, this is your reflection time. As an instructor, I am interested in knowing what techniques help students learn languages better. I am using my classrooms to do action research to see how learning might effectively take place. One of my research questions is "Does the amount of attention a learner gives to his/her learning have a positive effect on that learning?". I would like to explore this idea and use journal writing as a method of allowing learners to focus in on their learning by measuring the progress made according to unit exam scores. I do not plan to reveal any content of the journals written, nor do I plan to reveal any exam scores. However, I do feel the need to ask your permission to use the evidence I find (tendencies and trends in unit exam scores) since you are the students I am studying. Whether I receive your permission or not, the journals will remain a requirement of this course.

After gathering the evidence revealed in this study, I will analyze the data, test it statistically, and then draw some conclusions as to what I have found. This study will be presented in the summer of 1994 to my colleagues and professors at the Monterey Institute of International Studies, where I am currently studying to teach English to speakers of other languages.

I will also be doing some informal research/observations in class. On occasion, I may need to tape record or video tape my classes as a requirement for my classes in Monterey. I will announce such activities in advance, but I would first like to ask for your permission before carrying out such plans.

I appreciate your cooperation and participation in my research and I thank you for your contributions to my learning. Certainly these contributions will have a positive effect in the field of language study.

I (circle one, please) consent/object to allowing my language learning to be the subject of Miss Pagcaliwagan's study.

I understand that no part of my journal or my exam scores will be revealed without written consent by me.

Please sign name in full	Date
I (circle one, please) consent/object to allowing our class to be video/audio recorded.	
Please sign name in full	Date

Appendix C

Sample Unit Exam Test

Nom: _____ la date: _____

CONTACTS: L'EXAMEN DE L'UNITÉ 4

[Le professeur dit les phrases suivantes:

- I. A
1. Elles attendent chaque concert à l'université.
 2. Heureusement, ils réussissent à l'examen.
 3. Qu'est-ce qu'elle sert pour le dîner?

- I. B
1. Nous rentrons chez nous après le film.
 2. Henri, va à la banque!
 3. Ne regardons pas ce programme.]

I. Écouter

- A. Écoutez bien les phrases suivantes et indiquez si les phrases sont singulières (S) ou plurielles (P).

Écrivez "S" ou "P" 1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

- B. L'Impératif-Écoutez bien les phrases suivantes et indiquez si les phrases sont impératives (I) ou déclaratives (D).

Écrivez "I" ou "D" 1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

II. Utilisez l'expression du verbe AVOIR qui convient avec le contexte des phrases.

1. Vous faites des économies parce que vous _____ de l'argent.
2. Il achète un Dr. Pepper parce qu'il _____ beaucoup _____.
3. Tu as étudié jusqu' à 2:30 h. du matin. Demain, tu as une classe à 8:00 h.. Tu _____, alors tu dors en classe.

III. Écrivez la forme correcte de chaque verbe au temps présent.

1. Comment _____-tu? (sentir)
2. Vous _____ bien la nuit? (dormir)
3. Elle _____ bien la question. (entendre)
4. Nous _____ le petit examen. (réussir)
5. Je _____ visite à mes cousines. (rendre)

IV. L'Impératif-Dites aux personnes suivantes de faire ou ne pas faire les choses suivantes.

1. (Suzanne et Michelle) faire la vaisselle
2. (M. Gregoire) ne pas finir le programme
3. (Luc et moi = nous) rentrer chez nous

V. Écrivez les phrases suivantes au passé composé.

1. Avec qui sortez-vous, Mme Dupont?
2. Il fait beau toujours.
3. Il y a plusieurs amis à la fête.
4. Comment est-ce qu'il va à l'hôtel?
5. Je (Jean-Claude) reste chez moi chaque samedi.

VI. Écrivez les phrases suivantes au passé composé et ajoutez les adverbes.

1. Vous parlez. (trop)
2. Elles montent la montagne. (souvent)

VII. Écrivez les dates suivantes.

1. votre anniversaire
2. 1994 (les deux manières)

VIII. Il y a-Dites que les choses suivantes ont passé il y a du temps.

Écrivez au passé composé.

1. Nous avons des chiens (dogs). (10 ans)
2. Il pleut. (6 jours)

IX. Culture

1. Quels sont les éléments les plus essentiels au bonheur, d'après les jeunes Français?

a) _____ b) _____ c) _____

2. Quelle est la capitale de la France? _____

3. Paris est le centre politique, _____, et _____ de France.

4. Quels types de problèmes a Paris? a) _____ b) _____

5. Donnez l'origine de la plupart (majority) des étudiants étrangers en France:

a) _____ b) _____